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Muzzling scientists on warming

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On March 30, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Administrator Michael Griffen unveiled a new media policy for federal scientists amidst lofty words of commitment to "scientific and technical openness." This followed recent controversy surrounding the integrity of climate science at NASA and the administration as a whole. Unfortunately, the government's rhetoric may be no more than hot air.

Last year, Dr. James Hansen, lead NASA climatologist at the Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS), was placed under "administrative house arrest" -- denied media interviews and threatened with "dire consequences" by political appointees at NASA's public affairs office (PAO) who believe their job is "to make the president look good." The White House also screened press releases, papers, and lectures. Hansen's crimes: a conference presentation spelling out the troubling consequences of climate change and a statement to ABC News that 2005 was the warmest year on record.

With 33 years of expertise at GISS, Hansen warns that earth "is nearing -- a tipping point beyond which it will be impossible to avoid climate change with far-ranging undesirable consequences." According to Hansen, contemporary ice sheet behavior strongly suggests that current warming trends will raise sea levels at rates outpacing our ability to adapt. The last time Earth was five degrees warmer, about three million years ago, the sea stood 80 feet higher than today. Florida, swaths of the Eastern coastline, and indeed most of civilization will be scrambling for higher ground.

Understandably, Hansen felt compelled to point out alternative scenarios in which greenhouse gas emissions could be offset by efficiency gains and renewable energy. Undoubtedly, it is these inconvenient policy implications that stoked the ire of the Bush administration, which has allied with oil and industry in rejecting the scientific consensus on human-induced climate change. Indeed, the evidence of political interference with "inconvenient" science runs rampant.

Last year, Rick Piltz, a senior official in the U.S. Climate Change Science Program, blew the whistle on White House Council on Environmental Quality's Chief of Staff Philip Cooney. The hand-written edits of a high-profile climate report, which Piltz brought to light, shows how Cooney, a former oil lobbyist, systematically distorted scientific analysis. While Cooney joined ExxonMobil within days of resigning, Piltz started his own climate science watchdog group and received the 2006 Ridenhour Whistleblower Award.

The examples set by Hansen and Piltz and the gravity of climate-related problems have emboldened other scientists to speak out. Dr. Pieter Tans, an expert on carbon-cycling at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), recently objected to NOAA's media policy, which not only requires pre-approval for interviews but supervision by PAO monitors. In one instance, when CNBC requested an interview with Tom Knutson, a NOAA meteorologist and leading climate modeler, the PAO questioned Knutson beforehand about his anticipated comments on the link between climate change and worsening hurricanes. Knutson's cautious acknowledgement of a possible connection cost him the interview. Indeed, since Hurricane Katrina, NOAA has broadcast a "consensus" position rejecting the link, despite a contrary majority opinion of its own climatologists.

As House Science Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY) asserted in a January 30 letter to NASA, "Political figures ought to be reviewing their public statements to make sure they are consistent with the best available science; scientists should not be reviewing their statements to make sure they are consistent with the current political orthodoxy." Prompted by such strong words, NASA Administrator Griffen called for reform of NASA's media policy. It seemed the skies had cleared.

Regrettably, while the new policy is an improvement, technical loopholes and omissions in the eight-page document undermine NASA's promise of scientific freedom. Under this so-called reform, Hansen would still be in danger of 'dire consequences' for sharing his research -- the threat that sparked the new policy in the first place.

The new policy violates the Whistleblower Protection Act and other laws against muzzling federal employees and interfering with their rights to take their concerns to Congress. These are not innocent mistakes or oversights. Having been briefed by Hansen's attorneys, NASA decision-makers were well aware of the legal violations inherent in their new policy. Such media guidelines, which cast as much uncertainty as this administration wishes to ascribe to climate change, only leave us with our heads further in the clouds.

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